Beyond Sensationalism: Alternate Readings of Yellowbacks from 1850s to 1890s

Thesis submitted for the partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Arts

By

Chandrama Basu

Under the Supervision of

Dr Purna Banerjee

Department of English

Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences

Presidency University

Kolkata, India

2025

Thesis Title: Beyond Sensationalism: Alternate Readings of Yellowbacks from 1850s to 1890s

Name of the Candidate: Chandrama Basu

Registration Number- R-18RS103210237

Date of Registration- 12th April, 2021

Department: English

Signature of Candidate with Date: Chandrama Basu 23.12.2021

Synopsis

Yellowbacks, sometimes referred to as "railway novels," first appeared in the British literary market in the nineteenth century amidst an increase in the number of readers and the production of inexpensive books. While these two developments complemented each other, the nineteenth century English intelligentsia grew anxious about the impact of cheap reading materials like yellowbacks, on the minds of the ill-educated readers. Although yellowbacks became immensely popular among the general public, critics voiced their concerns about their sensationalising impact on contemporary readers, who were believed to lack the training and intellectual capacity to properly estimate the quality of the reading materials they consumed.

The central argument of my thesis is that contrary to popular perception, yellowbacks evolved from mere sensational sources to complex cultural artefacts, offering diverse readings to Victorian audiences, and reflecting the era's varied cultural developments and complexities. The objective of my thesis is to investigate some of the most recurring themes of yellowbacks and analyse how their diverse readers interacted with the collection within the socio-historical context in which they encountered the books. I base my argument on three basic premises. Firstly, the themes of yellowbacks were not limited only to transgressive or melodramatic themes but embodied classics like Jane Austen's novels, endorsed a confessional genre with narratives like *The Confession of a Horse Dealer* or *The Revelations of a Catholic Priest*, autobiographical memoirs like *A Famous Fox-Hunter*, *Memoirs of Henrietta Caracciolo*, political novels as *Phineas Finn*, satires like Grant Allen's *Philistia*, to mention a few. Secondly, the readership of yellowbacks was not limited only to working-class readers or male readers but comprised a major section of bourgeois as well as female readers. Finally, I contend that the multiple forms of yellowbacks' reception were influenced by their socio-cultural position in contemporary times and their relationship with the primary reading space of yellowbacks, i.e., the railway carriages.

I begin the thesis with the "Introduction: A Metanarrative of Yellowbacks" where I trace the various socio-cultural factors which led to the emergence and development of yellowbacks. Here, I assess the contemporary reviews about the material makeup and thematic contents of yellowbacks to assess their contemporary reputation as sensational reading matters. Thereafter, in Chapter 1 of the thesis, "The Known and the Unknown: Readers of Yellowbacks" I discern the readership of yellowbacks, particularly in terms of

their socio-economic background and gender identification. I examine the intended audience by analysing one of the most pervasive paratextual components of yellowbacks, the ornate advertisements of various goods and services that adorned the yellowbacks, the material state of the main location where yellowbacks were consumed, the railway carriage, and the space's ideological meaning during the Victorian era.

My research indicates that yellowbacks could not have been feasible for the entire working class, with the exception of skilled workers who earned almost twice as much as the average worker during that time and could afford to spend some of their earnings on leisure activities; middle-class people who were either better off financially or whose income coincided with the privileged section of the working class annually and had better reading conditions on the railways; male readers who controlled the railways' public space and for whom reading materials were specifically created; and, lastly, female readers who gradually became regular users of the railways and reinterpreted the setting to fit their own needs and goals. The effectiveness of the railways as a reading space was recognized by all and used in a variety of ways by the various readers based on how they interpreted and interacted with the space.

As the readers' selection of reading materials, as well as their subsequent interaction and interpretation of a text, are heavily influenced by the reader's socio-historical background, a substantive portion of the thesis is engaged in examining some of the most common themes found in yellowbacks in order to identify the various ways that readers engaged with the collection. As such, in Chapter 2, "Yellowbacks and Dissemination of Informal Education" I concentrate on self-learning and informal education, two of the most important facets of Victorian reading culture. I show that despite being an era of active educational reformations, the period witnessed numerous students who were unable to finish their education because of various socioeconomic limitations. Nevertheless, they wished to obtain knowledge of the latest developments of the Victorian period and more to elevate their socio-cultural status. I demonstrate that yellowbacks served the function of providing rudimentary information to the new class of readers by publishing a variety of non-academic, jargon-free science books, guidebooks and instruction manuals, memoirs and historical narratives.

Notwithstanding its reputation as a time of remarkable educational reform, the era was marked by several disputes and inconsistencies. Indeed, Victorian Britain's narrative of

social developments is marked by underlying tensions and dualities rather than being uniformly progressive. The canonical writers of the period responded to the various unprecedented disputes and setbacks that came into existence in the period through what is broadly termed as "social problem novels". This genre often addressed the more general issues of industrial England, the widespread corruption in the legal and administrative system, and so forth to educate readers and society. However, there remained many equally important issues that were hardly discussed by contemporary literary stalwarts. In the third chapter of my thesis, "Yellowbacks and Social Problems" I propose that yellowbacks bridged this gulf by addressing many such scarcely addressed issues. Through the discussion of both well-known and obscure, but equally important subjects, the yellowbacks ensured that the new readers were adequately apprised about the ambiguities that lay beneath the purported advancements and developments of the day. Through the fictionalisation of existing social problems, yellowbacks bring the readers closer to the predicaments of society, educate the readers, find solutions to the problems addressed in the narratives and finally, prompt the society into adopting proper measures to improve the shortcomings.

In spite of the social issues that plagued English society, the nineteenth century saw the British Empire grow to an unprecedented size and gain control over roughly 25% of the world's population. Britain's hegemonic power over the world not only widened its social and cultural sphere of influence globally but also sparked interest in and excitement about its imperial dealings among the metropole's ordinary citizens. While erudite English readers interested in the colonial discourse of England perused widespread newspaper reports and journal articles to satisfy their fascination about the Empire, such discussions were frequently too formal and empirical for the average reader. Victorian literature's engagement in colonial discourse was also relatively limited. In this context, yellowbacks helped to settle the glaring gap in colonial and imperial representation in Victorian literature by furnishing the many complexities of the Empire to the attention of the general public. I contend that like numerous vehicles of Victorian popular culture, yellowbacks acted as a vehicle for conveying to readers the essence of Imperialism and sustaining the Eurocentric vision of its civilizing endeavour.

The Victorian era was actually filled with heated discussions about dominance, submission, inferiority, and superiority—not just in relation to race or nation, but in practically every aspect of Victorian life, including class and gender. The era was especially linked to defined gender roles in society, viewing men as the rulers and masters of society and women as lowly creatures who, due to their inherent frailty, needed to be kept under the

supervision and care of men. Chapter 5 of the thesis, "Yellowbacks and Negotiation of Gender Roles" shows yellowbacks played a significant role in establishing the status quo through its portraiture of traditional gender performances. Additionally, a closer examination of yellowbacks shows that they also feature the contrasting roles of the "Angel of the House" and the Transgressive deviant women and how men were gradually expanding their domain of existence and participating in jobs that were conventionally reserved for women. In this chapter, I relate that as a product intrinsically associated with the social, cultural and political developments of the period, yellowbacks reflected both the stereotypes and the changing dynamics of gender relationships in the Victorian period.

In my thesis, "Beyond Sensationalism: Alternate Readings of Yellowbacks from 1850s to 1890s", I argue that while yellowbacks did sensationalise some readers by polygamous women, wives planning to murder their husbands, men flirting with widows or women flirting with widowers, they were also performing functions that were carried out by other academic, "high-brow" reading materials of the age. In "Conclusion: Yellowbacks and Heterogeneity- Themes, Readers and Readings", I suggest that the new reading public was eager for reading matters that fulfilled their demands in terms of affordability, comprehensibility and relevancy and yellowbacks were able to satisfy their needs, unlike many contemporary formal institutions of reading and education. The yellowbacks liberated the practice of reading by bringing the supposedly obscure topics of scientific, economic, cultural, moral, and national importance amidst the market for the common readers to read, understand, debate, accept or reject. In the Victorian period, yellowbacks evolved into a powerful tool to both adapt to the current Victorian developments and foreshadow the impending social transformations.

11/9/25